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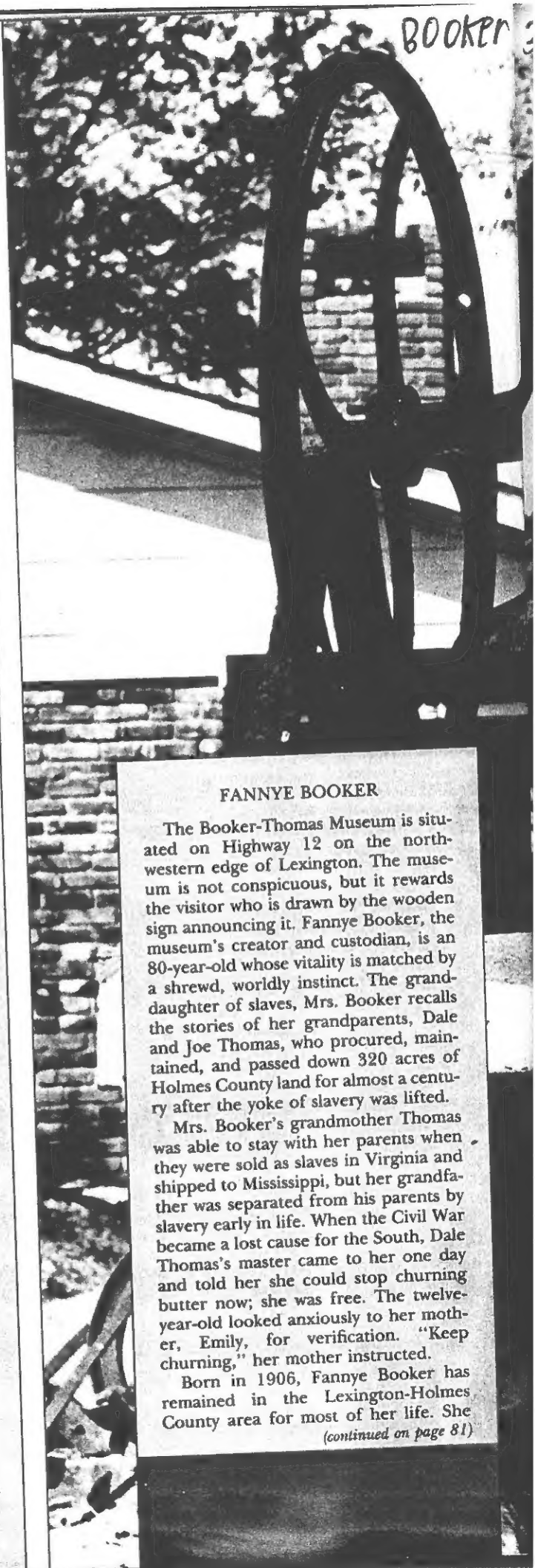
# Thicker than Water

by Lanny McKay  
photographs by Cathey Plunkett

**T**he Greek historian Thucydides defined history as "philosophy learned from examples." The hard-edged examples set by Mississippi's progenitors have etched the philosophy of the state's current—and perhaps future—generations. The lives of a few of Mississippi's early settlers and their modern descendants are profiled here. Three of the families are white, tracing their powerful lineages to governors, kings, and emperors; one family is black, piecing together the remnants of a history uprooted by slavery; and one is Choctaw Indian, representing Mississippi's truest ancestors.

It seems that the heritage of our state resembles a fine road dust; subtle yet pervasive, camouflaging the bedrock of previous civilizations. The dust can be brushed away to view our looking glass of history or sifted through the hands of sons and daughters returning to their homelands. From colonial times and Indian wars to the Civil War, Reconstruction, and beyond, each family presented here has survived the fire storms of change.

Mississippi's early settlers have passed down a heritage of pioneering spirit exemplified in the pride of their modern-day descendants.



## FANNYE BOOKER

The Booker-Thomas Museum is situated on Highway 12 on the northwestern edge of Lexington. The museum is not conspicuous, but it rewards the visitor who is drawn by the wooden sign announcing it. Fannye Booker, the museum's creator and custodian, is an 80-year-old whose vitality is matched by a shrewd, worldly instinct. The granddaughter of slaves, Mrs. Booker recalls the stories of her grandparents, Dale and Joe Thomas, who procured, maintained, and passed down 320 acres of Holmes County land for almost a century after the yoke of slavery was lifted.

Mrs. Booker's grandmother Thomas was able to stay with her parents when they were sold as slaves in Virginia and shipped to Mississippi, but her grandfather was separated from his parents by slavery early in life. When the Civil War became a lost cause for the South, Dale Thomas's master came to her one day and told her she could stop churning butter now; she was free. The twelve-year-old looked anxiously to her mother, Emily, for verification. "Keep churning," her mother instructed.

Born in 1906, Fannye Booker has remained in the Lexington-Holmes County area for most of her life. She

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## FANNYE BOOKER

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attended Jackson State University and Mississippi Valley State University and graduated from Mississippi Industrial College in Holly Springs. In 1929 she became a teacher in the Holmes County school system, earning \$17.50 per month. One of three children, she was the only one to attend college.

In the late 1930s Mrs. Booker and her husband, William, moved onto a large farm cooperative which had been formed in nearby Cruger. Fannye clerked at the general store and worked as a receptionist at the doctor's office there while William worked the fields and tended his cows. The first credit union in the area was established at the cooperative, and the profits on the huge complex were divided equally. The integrated facility was successful, as were the Bookers.

Soon, however, the white power structure became concerned with what it thought the cooperative was teaching residents, such as voting procedures. "That wasn't true," Mrs. Booker says. "All they taught us was how to work, how to save, and how to manage our affairs."

But pressure on the cooperative's founders soon took its toll. "They made them shut it down," says Mrs. Booker. "It could have been great."

Fannye and William Booker returned to Lexington. She soon found that the Holmes County school system would not rehire her as a teacher because of her participation at the cooperative. It was to be a black list that she would remain on for the rest of her life, effectively ending her public school career in Holmes County. She had to go into Tallahatchie County to get work as a teacher.

From 1959 until 1979 Mrs. Booker operated a boarding home in Lexington which became an old folks home. With the advent of Head Start in 1964, she finally got another chance at teaching in Holmes County, starting the second Head Start school in Holmes County and working with the program until 1979, when she retired. By that time her husband had died, so she sold the boarding home and built the Booker—Thomas Museum in 1980.

The idea for the museum came to her one day as she was examining the feasibility of an antique shop. The families of Mrs. Booker and her husband were large, but nearly all of the members had moved away, leaving them with a huge cache of antiques. "I studied how old these things were, and I remembered how the elderly people cherished these things," she recalls. "I

decided it was much better to keep these things in a museum than sell them one time in a shop." The museum is packed with artifacts from various aspects of Holmes County farm life. A few items, such as a sausage grinder and stuffer, are pre-Civil War vintage. An ancient Edison phonograph and an elaborate NCR cash register are two of the cornerstones of olden days. Other items include a coffee grinder from the 1800s, old saws and plow tools, and a "witch pot," which was used for telling fortunes by tossing coffee grounds into water.

Her museum is free to visitors. Mrs. Booker has given a number of her best artifacts to the Old Capitol Museum and the Smith-Robertson Museum in Jackson, but her collection is still impressive. Visitors from California, Illinois, Iowa, and other states come to the museum when visiting their old homesites in Lexington. Next to the museum sits a tiny wooden house which is thought to be authentic slave quarters. Outside, three pens of chickens, ducks, and dogs protest the presence of strangers.

Mrs. Booker spends several hours each day doing volunteer work at a senior citizens' center. On Saturday she continues her volunteer work at the Methodist Hospital in Lexington, and she makes time on Sunday to attend her church, Sweetwater Christian Methodist Episcopal, where she was baptized as a teenager sixty-six years ago. ●

## TOM GOLDMAN

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before the War of 1812 was one of relative peace and prosperity, with the Choctaws engaging in trading with British and Spanish companies from Pensacola, Florida, and elsewhere and prospering as farmers, too. At the Battle of New Orleans in 1814, Choctaw Indians led by Pushmataha contributed significantly to the American victory over the British.

After the war, however, the Indians' fate went from uncertain to turbulent to, at times, tragic. A doctrine evolved from the hands of such leaders as Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson claiming the Indians had not improved the land, so the Choctaws and other tribes were pressured to cede their lands to the white man in exchange for other lands in the vast expanses of the Great Plains. By 1830 the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, which ceded much of central Mississippi to the United States Government, had been signed by the Mississippi Choctaws.

The treaty helped to initiate the infamous Trail of Tears march to Oklahoma, which was led by the Mississippi Choctaws. White men of sometimes dubious virtue contracted with the federal government to transport the Indians, and wagon trains were hastily assembled. Along the Trail of Tears whites often took potshots at the traveling Indians for amusement.

The Mississippi Choctaws settled in the Ouachita Mountains area of southeastern Oklahoma. Known as one of the Five Civilized Tribes (along with the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole tribes deported to Oklahoma), the Choctaws established a capital named Tuskahoma in what became Pushmataha County, Oklahoma.

Not all Mississippi Choctaws went to

## Goldman's search for his roots revealed some interesting history of the Mississippi Choctaws.

Oklahoma, however. Legally, they could stay here, claiming ownership by treaty provision, but by so doing they would come under the jurisdiction of Mississippi law. By moving to Oklahoma they would remain under Choctaw law. The Choctaws were concerned about being governed by Mississippi law because they were generally distrustful of the ambiguities of the state laws and because the moral issues that affected them were not addressed as in their tribal laws.

The suspicions of the Indians were confirmed when many Choctaws, especially non-English-speaking ones, lost their lands to white men through legal technicalities and public intimidation.

Many of the Mississippi Choctaws, including Tom Goldman's father, eventually came back from Oklahoma. Since Goldman has taken an active interest in his heritage, he has discovered six former Choctaw villages in Mississippi and has mapped all of the Indian trails. "I've located where Pushmataha lived," says Goldman, "which is contrary to